

# Civic Duty

## Airmen help Palau islanders with construction, health needs

by Master Sgt. Orville F. Desjarlais Jr.  
photos by Tech. Sgt. Shane Cuomo

**M**embers of the Palau Civic Action Team don't have identity crises, although maybe they should. Because of their humanitarian mission, the 13 Airmen work among the people of Palau. However, these very same people sometimes mistakenly call them Navy Seabees. Historically, the Navy ran the CAT program, but in 2003, it became a joint initiative between the Air Force,



**Capt. Kristen Bakotic plays with Cody, the Air Force camp's mascot on the island of Palau. The captain is the officer-in-charge of the Palau Civic Action Team, a group of 13 Airmen who help the island with its basic infrastructure development, offer medical assistance and train local Palauans to become skilled technicians, all while providing a favorable U.S. military presence.**

Navy and Army. Thus the confusion.

To battle that image problem and show their Air Force pride, the Palau Civic Action Team painted the Air Force symbol on everything in Camp Katuu: on the sign coming into the camp, on a flag, atop a roof, on the basketball court backboards, on the horseshoe pit backstops, and on nearly every door. Only the camp dog, Cody, remains logo free.

Palau Presidential Chief of Staff Billy Kuartei knows all about the Airmen and what they have to offer his island.

"We are grateful to have an Air Force team here," Mr. Kuartei said. "The bond between the United States and Palau is very visible under the CAT (initiative)."

The team, only the second all-Air Force team in the Palau CAT's history, helps the island with its basic infrastructure development, offers medical assistance, and trains local Palauans to become skilled technicians, all while providing a favorable U.S. military presence.

The island is relatively poor, but as tourism grows the country is becoming stronger. While there are a few resort hotels, and nicer homes, many of the nearby homes are simple and made of tin.

"The ministry of education doesn't have a lot of money, but they have a lot of schools to maintain," said Capt. Kristen Bakotic, the officer-in-charge of the team. "What we do is provide the manpower and expertise. If they pay for the materials, we'll build or fix it for them for free."

"One of the main reasons we're here is to provide basic infrastructure support, and to train eager Palauans how to become skilled technicians that will later enter the Palauan workforce," she said. "In doing that, we also extend a positive U.S. image and have a tremendous impact."

The first all-Air Force CAT team arrived in Palau in 2004 and began building an emergency search and rescue sub-station for Babledaob, the largest of all the islands that compose Palau. The island, composed of 10 states, was in dire need of the sub-station because rescuers took anywhere from one to two hours to get the injured to the main hospital in the Capitol State of Koror. The new sub-station houses a fire truck, ambulance and jail.

"The importance of that project was huge," the captain said. "The first Air Force CAT team started it, the Navy team between us worked on the interior and we added the finishing touches."

Other projects the team has completed include building a recreational pavilion for the Palau Community College, an extension on a summerhouse for patients in a mental ward, repairing and painting an elementary school, constructing a covered walkway and tiling a cafeteria for an elementary school on an outlying island, repairing and constructing roads in five different states, as well as various other renovations and repairs throughout Palau.

"For me, the summer house project was the best project we've done so far," said Tech. Sgt. Mike Gandy, the senior equipment operator and vehicle control officer. "The patients really showed us how appreciative they were."

One project included building a road that lead to a cemetery. Previously, vehicles couldn't make it all the way to the cemetery because the road was so bad. Mourners had to stop and carry the casket the rest of the way.

In addition to civil engineering taskings, the CAT also uses a physician's assistant to help with the health care of those on the island who cannot afford regular hospital fees.

Capt. Dan Calderon is in charge of the medical portion of the team designed to work with local medical and U.S. Public Health Services officials to establish and carry out free, limited health care to anyone on Palau. The captain also provides care for the 12 other CAT members.

"I treat everyone to include foreign nationals from Bangladesh, China, the Philippines, as well as local Palauans," he said.

A majority of the patients are on work-permit visas and cannot afford the \$80 fee charged by the local hospital. If he has the medication patients need, he gives it to them. If not, he prescribes it to them so they can get it filled elsewhere.

The captain works in a modest clinic at the camp, a series of buildings where CAT members work, eat and sleep. Kitchen-table chairs lined against the wall act as a waiting area, while a blue curtain strung from a metal rod provides patient privacy. Underneath the curtain, those in the waiting room can see patients' feet dangling while they sit on the examination table.

Captain Calderon, like the physician assistant before him, is also expected to venture out to nearby, remote islands to offer his services. Some are accessible only by boat. The CAT owns a 25-foot boat for just that reason. When the CAT travels to remote islands, they usually set out fishing



lines and troll in hopes of catching dinner along the way.

"The people are very thankful that we're here," Captain Calderon said. "I like the fact that we care for the local people who don't have a lot of money. I think we're doing a good job here."

Life on Palau is slow-paced and laid back. Most islanders run on "Palau time," meaning they may or may not be on time. That doesn't mean life at

**Staff Sgt. Chris Nelson, a heavy equipment operator, and Staff Sgt. Kevin Babers, a structures journeyman, lower the American and Palauan flags at the end of their duty day at Camp Katuu. Though modest, the camp provides the basic necessities to the 13 Airmen who make up the Palau Civic Action Team.**



Camp Katuu is easy. The CAT purifies its own water and relies on generator power whenever island power goes out.

One of Tech Sgt. Mike Luhmann's jobs is to make potable water for the camp. He stores water in two 6,000-gallon tanks. After adding chlorine and sifting the pond water through a series of filters, the plumber by trade makes the water fit to drink.

"Camp life is pretty good," said Staff Sgt. Kevin Babers, a civil engineering structures journeyman. "We share rooms that are about 16-foot by 16-foot. It's better than living in a tent."

The rooms are complete with cable television and wireless Internet capability.

All the CAT's shops are located at the camp, including transportation, where the team's two mechanics, Master Sgt. Loren Rose and Tech. Sgt. Matt Schott have a demanding job. Together they are responsible to keep over 21 pieces of heavy equipment and vehicles operational so the CAT mission can continue.

While the joint operation instructions say the camp must be open to the public at least once a month, the CAT leaves it open every day for local people to use the gym, basketball court, volleyball court, and watch movies every Tuesday and Thursday at the outside theater. They also share their break area, complete with a pool table, ping pong table and dartboard to socialize with the local population during specific events.

It also doesn't hurt the Air Force's reputation to have the local people at the camp, where they can see the Air Force symbol, everywhere, on everything. The more they know the CAT is Air Force, the less the islanders will call the Airmen Navy Seabees. 🦅



**Tech Sgts. Jamie Pahukoa, Dave Vinatieri and Mike Luhmann** discuss an upcoming project involving the local Head Start facility. As part of the Palau Civic Action Team, the sergeants are tasked with assisting in infrastructure developments around the island.



**Physician's Assistant Capt. Dan Calderon** looks over a chart while Georgia Rengul, his Palauan apprentice, takes Tech Sgt. Matt Schott's temperature. The PA not only provides health care for the other CAT members, but also others on the island.